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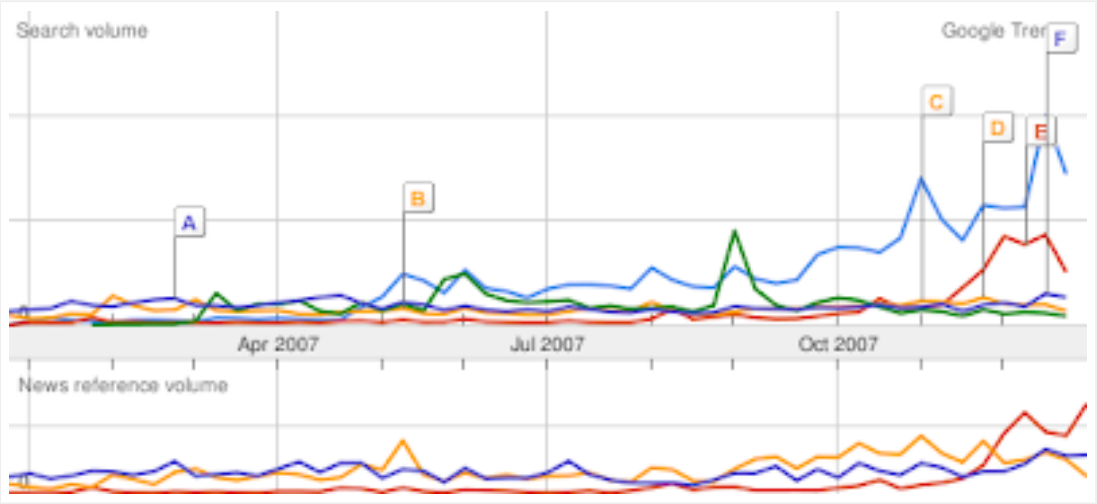
Saturday, January 05, 2008

Ron Paul, Internet culture, and the new generation gap

Ron Paul scored a respectable, if hardly leading, 10% among Republicans in the Iowa caucus,and will probably garner an even higher share of the vote in New Hampshire. (For my overseas readers, the United States is currently in the "primary elections" which determine the nominees of each party for the next President of the United States). Yet, at one extreme, traditional media has rarely mentioned Paul, considering him to be an unthinkably fringe candidate, while judging from the Internet buzz you'd think that Ron Paul was the leading Republican candidate. Google trends shows that "Ron Paul" (A, in light blue) has for the last few months been searched for on the Internet more than any of the other major Republican candidates, and "Huckabee"(red) the second most:



The large Internet presence of Ron Paul and Mike Huckabee is confirmed by the number of mentions as indicated by Yahoo search results:

"Ron Paul" 52.5 million
"Mike Huckabee" 32.4 million
"Mitt Romney" 28.6 million
"John McCain" 26.5 million
"Rudy Giuliani" (+ "Rudolph") 22.5 million
"Fred Thompson" 18.3 million

This vast discrepancy between Paul's Internet presence and his traditional media presence has given rise to all sorts of conspiracy theories, for example that the mainstream media's polls are rigged against Paul, or that the Ron Paul effect is just a spam campaign being run by some eccentric millionaire. (In fact, while there may be a bias against cellphone-only young voters from doing landline

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polls, the 7.3% mean of polls was within the margin of error of Paul's actual 10%, and Google and Yahoo to protect their ad revenues go to great lengths to prevent spam from rigging search results). But there is something interesting, and far bigger than any particular candidate or ideology, going on.

CNN entrance polls from Iowa showed the following vote distribution among 17-29 yearolds: Huckabee 40%, Romney 22%, Paul 21%, McCain 7%, Giuliani 5%, Thompson 4%. Paul garnered more than twice the support of this demographic than he did among older age groups. I expect Paul to come in second among the under-29s in New Hampshire, behind Romney but ahead of Huckabee and McCain, but to rank below most of these candidates in older age groups.

Here's a very oversimplified theory, but one worth thinking about: mainstream media is Baby Boomers and old people, and Internet is young people. By "is" I mean both the producers and the consumers of the media. And, as with the "generation gap" in the 1960s, they mostly don't talk to each other. (Along the same lines, the 1960s generation gap may have had much to do with television. But that's a story for another day). Furthermore, as with the monk's scribal culture versus the new print culture during the Renaissance and Reformation, and as with pre-1960s versus post-1960s culture, traditional media culture and Internet culture are very different cultures with very different views of the world. (Ironically, Ron Paul himself is an old codger like John McCain and Fred Thompson. He seems to be as surprised as anybody else about his support, which seems from the point of view of traditional media culture to have come out of nowhere).

One could have used Internet search and result figures months ago to predict stronger showings by Huckabee and Paul than polls then showed, and especially to predict their relative strength among youth. The Fox/talk radio axis ignore Paul and dump on Huckabee, not so much intentionally (they do have some reasons of self-interest to do so, but that's beyond the scope of this post) as out of habitual cultural and generational differences and the simple fact that they and their audiences are not very aware of Internet culture and the fading of their mass media culture as being representative of conservatism.

Mass media, both left and right, have long assumed their overwhelming influence on elections from selecting politicians for coverage. Although that influence remains very strong, the desertion of the young to the Internet is starting to erode that king-making power, and will erode it further in future elections. Paul's message of extremely small federal government, in particular, is very threatening to federal government employees and the journalists who habitually socialize with those employees and depend on them for stories. In the past this has been evidenced by the mainstream media coverage given to the Libertarian Party (to which Paul's message most closely hews) -- i.e. by the practically complete lack of any such coverage. In the past Paul's message of adhering to the U.S. Constitution's enumeration of a handful of federal powers, which include neither welfare handouts nor wars undeclared by Congress, though entirely mainstream in terms of U.S. history, would have achieved no media coverage except being the butt of occasional jokes about "whackos". Now not only have the "whacko" yuks greatly increased and gotten shrill (methinks they protest too much!), but some serious coverage of Paul has started to occur as well. (Most of the latter, though, has been from left wing journalists who consider Paul's anti-war message to be mainstream). As for Huckabee, his southern Baptist evangelism, perceived by non-evangelists to be uncompromsising, is very alien and threatening to the owners, advertisers, and journalists in right-wing media, very few of whom are southern Baptists. (There is much evidence of this religious war within the right wing -- another example was the right wing media attack on the Harriet Myers nomination to the Supreme Court -- but that thread is beyond the scope of this post).

Admittedly, there are also other things going on with the Internet results, such as Paul's popularity among technology entrepreneurs and workers who, along with young people, are more likely to use the Internet for political discussion and to learn about the candidates. But the growing gap between Internet and mass media cultures, which is also in part a generation gap, should not be underestimated. Fueled by the Internet, I expect these gaps to grow more severe, and political ideologies and other cultural norms to trend more towards the developing Internet culture, in the coming years.

Posted by Nick Szabo at 12:07 PM

1 comment:

happyjuggler0 said...

The main thing you do with a vote is send a signal to political players about your views

Thanks for pointing that out. I've been trying to tell people for years that voting for the "most electable candidate" is actually worse than wasting their vote if in their mind it is a choice between the lesser of two evils.

Much better to send a message and add your incremental vote along with others incremental votes to a candidate/cause you believe in. People go "a ha, the percentage of voters who value liberty is increasing, maybe we ought to pay more attention to them in the future".

On the other hand, if you vote for the lesser of two evils, "they" look at the vote totals and say "wow, look at all the suport for these statist guys, with so little support for liberty, I know which way I'll direct policy to try to gain votes in the future".

9:51 AM

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